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How to Orient Yourself in the Wilderness

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HOW TO ORIENT YOURSELF IN THE WILDERNESS

by

JACK DEESE

Under the Direction of Constance Thalken, MFA

ABSTRACT

How to Orient Yourself in the Wilderness is an exhibition presented in the style of a survival guide. The “wilderness” is a metaphor for the unknown. Within this category of the unknown are numerous literal and figurative spaces. I use the guide as an attempt to pin down why I gravitate towards the camera and what it means to me as a form of communication. Simultaneously I explore what it means to be “southern” and the manner in which it is traditionally represented in images. Also included in the wilderness tag is the “art world” and the relationship of straight photography towards and with it. The exhibition is loosely attached to the survival guide premise in order to highlight the shortcoming of photography’s ability to explain.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, American South, Wilderness, Guide, Color, Affect

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by

JACK DEESE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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2016

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May 2016

DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate this work to my wife, Lauren. Without your unwavering support I could not have made it to this point. Thank you for the encouragement when I was self-deprecating, and for bringing me back down to earth when I was self-congratulating. You have always accepted my best and worst equally, and done so with love and understanding. I love you.

Second, I would like to dedicate this work to my daughter, Emmaline. Although it will be many years before you will read and understand this, I want you to know how instrumental you have been in helping me realize the importance of unabashedly being yourself. I hope I have taught you even half of what you have taught me. I love you.

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1 INTRODUCTION

I have spent my entire life in a relatively small swath of the country. I have been on a plane three times, flying to upstate New York, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. I was born in a small town, Hartwell, GA, right on the Georgia/South Carolina border. My family briefly lived in northern Florida while I was still an infant, and most summer trips were to visit extended family in Alabama or the Carolinas. I would classify my family as lower middle class, with my dad's family situated solidly in the middle, and my Mom's family would be even lower on the income spectrum. Both sides of the family are blue collar, but represent different influences on the way I view the world. My Dad was the older of two children, and I represent one of four grandchildren. My Mom was the middle of five children, and I represent one of 14 grandchildren. The two families lived less than an hour apart, but were different as night and day in my mind.

I can think of a number of ways this difference played out, but I want to focus on their settings. On my Mother's side, my grandparents lived in a doublewide trailer set on around an acre in an area about 20 minutes outside the town of Florence, SC. On my Dad's side, the house was a brick ranch built by my grandfather. Their lot was also around an acre, but right in the town of Rockingham, NC. Both places had plenty of space for the children to play, and both shared aspects like a clothesline and a large garden.

A visit to Florence was exciting because of the open door policy my grandfather had. Once you met him, you were always welcome at his house. As a curious child, I loved being around the noise and energy that their house always had. There was also a shed outback, mostly for the men to smoke cigarettes, drink Lord Calvert, and "cut up." (My grandmother wouldn't allow alcohol in the house.) The interior space was always precious, so the children usually slept

on a “pallet” of stacked blankets placed on the floor. Dining space was equally hard to find, so big meals were eaten outside on folding tables and usually done in shifts. The food was on Styrofoam plates, the drinks in Styrofoam cups with your name scribbled on the side.

Traveling about an hour north to Rockingham through a network of two-lane state highways, the experience was quite dissimilar. The house was quiet, neat, and felt almost sterile. Most of my time was still spent outdoors, in the woods behind the house, or walking down the to gas station a few blocks away. Meals were always eaten at the table, and my grandmother would microwave the porcelain plates. I don’t recall there ever being more than 10 people inside the house, and half of them were my parents and siblings.

We visited each Grandparents’ house frequently, although the closest one was always at least three hours from our house. It was on these drives that I fell in love with looking. I vividly remember being in the backseat, looking out through the window and seeing scene after scene that I wished we could stop and get a closer look. We primarily took small state highways, which were ripe with visual stimuli to keep me interested for the duration of the drive. Once we began to abandon the smaller highways for the interstate, the ride became laborious. I would relish every stop we made whether it was at gas stations, restaurants, or rest areas. Each exit provided a plethora of things for my eyes to take in. It was almost too much.

During these trips and across my childhood, the presence of a camera was rare. My mother was the photographer in the family, but her camera was relegated to holidays, school functions, and larger family get-togethers.

I don’t remember when I began taking pictures with a camera, but I remember very early on recalling scenes from memory. A lot of that can be attributed to my dad and these back roads, with him always telling me to be on the look out for visual markers. “That’s how you know

you're headed in the right direction. " The landmark was specific, but also simultaneously vague. You needed to select a particular building or sign, but you didn't have to know the name of the road or town it was in. The marker is a stand-in, a surrogate for actually knowing the directions in your head. This to me is very much akin to my photographic approach. Certain photographs are markers to show that you are on course. The starting point or destination becomes irrelevant, but the idea that you are headed somewhere is important. I don't think I could successfully make connections in my work if I tried to plan them out. The connections often happen, mostly because I am frequently attracted to similar things in different places.

I feel most photographers work in this manner but feel somewhat ashamed to admit it. Photographers are already looked down upon for their process being "easy," so to confess that you didn't even have a solid idea about what you were photographing in the first place seems particularly unbecoming. This exhibition started with the title and worked backwards. It was a retracing of steps, a reenactment of steps, and a step forward.

2 Navigating Terms

2.1 Two Choices

I have always found myself struggling to speak about my work within the terms of another medium. The space I have resided in for quite some time now lies between a modernist attitude of detachment and a postmodern exercise of self-evaluation. It is equivalent to trudging through mud. It would seem that a balance between the two would be ideal, but I am less balancing and more mentally running back and forth. I've always equated writing and talking about my work to justification. This defensive stance is primarily due to the collective agreement that photography is violent and objectifies. Writer Victor Burgin says that photography only offers two choices, "narcissistic identification or voyeurism." Roland Barthes takes an even grimmer stance, that photographer's are "agents of death." The list of those most critical about the medium are all too often also on the required reading list in academic programs: Sontag, Sekula, and Berger. The language of these writers is strong enough to push any burgeoning photographer back on their heels. So, it's no surprise that any analysis of photographic intentions must then address either explicitly or implicitly the notions of violence and the role of exploiter.

2.2 Same Difference

My biggest breakthrough was realizing that there is a clear separation between the production of photographs, and the editing and sequencing of them. The divide must be at least 50% editing, and might even be higher. According to artist Takashi Homma, editing is the most crucial part of photography and is what separates contemporary photographers from their predecessors. Homma states that "classic photography" is "straight photography" whereas "contemporary photography" is more about presentation. So whether a photograph is set-up in

the studio or a candid taken on the street, accidental moments will always happen, like finding that particular glance, or the way the light falls in a particular frame. Given the preponderance of accidents that can happen in photography, just about anyone can capture a striking single image. The skill of the artist lies in his ability to thread together a collection of images, maybe just two, or maybe 200.

This practice of editing as the dominant action dramatically shifted my method of working. Previously I was working from self-generated checklists of subjects to photograph that adhered to a documentary style. The pictures were technically sound and visually arresting, but when brought together, something was missing for me. The images started to have too close a relationship and fit together in a way that was easily forgotten. I think passive may be the best term to describe the images prior to this current body of work. Taking a documentary photography class helped to clarify my disappointment with the work I was producing. Those images now read as in service of the “project” and seemed shallow in their depictions.

My decision to work in this style was a conscious result in wanting to replicate the look of Alec Soth. His book *Niagara* was especially influential and emulating its look became my primary goal when making photographs. I was still an undergraduate at this point, so I’ll cut myself some slack, but even after graduating, this particular aesthetic became hard to shake. In looking at a lot of contemporary photographers today, it appears I’m not the only one that yearned to adopt this “Soth Aesthetic.” The formula is rooted in photographic history with stylistic off shoots from Robert Frank’s *The Americans* and Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*. Add Soth’s mentor, Joel Sternfeld, to the look and you’re pretty much set for success. The photographs will be mostly deadpan, colors slightly muted, and all made with a large format camera. There will be a mix of romanticized landscapes, quirky still lifes, and portraits. (Fig. 2.1)



Figure 2.1 Alec Soth, Selections from *Niagara*, Steidl, 2006

The photographs will reside under the umbrella of a location either micro, the name of a town, or macro, regions of or the entire United States itself. A book will be made. Usually the photographer under the dark cloth will resemble someone similar to myself, a 25-35 year old white male from a middle class background. There is often success in formulas and this is no exception. I was headed towards this less than a year ago and feel confident that I would have done so with some success as well. Luckily (or unluckily, only time will tell) the photographs became too easy for me and left me wanting.

This wanting gave way to apathy, but my love in taking photographs never wavered. I stopped thinking about any sort of project or idea and instead looked for inspiration in photographs and photobooks that resonated strongly with me. I began making “covers” of particular images, like a band might reinterpret another band’s song. The images began to collect without much thought into where they would end up. After printing and living with a handful of them, common themes started to emerge. They were similar to answers I was given a few years back when asking people to sum up the “south” in just a few words. The most common responses were the land, family, food, and religion. This was a moment where I felt the beginning of things coming together. I had always wanted to make work that referenced Southern culture, but did so in a way that allowed me to never utter the word identity, which has become an overused catch all for any art that includes portraits. The photographs became amalgamations of my interest in photo history, southern culture, and southern literature all distilled down into something coherent. I’ve always put a lot of emphasis on language, and in doing so, have become gun-shy to speak at points, so developing terms to speak about my process has been hugely beneficial. The “distillation of influences” is a phrase that informed my way

thought process. I adopted a mantra of exploration, not illustration, that applied both to the production of images and their sequencing.

2.3 How to...

The notion of exploration remained in my head for quite a while and led to the title, *How to Orient Yourself in the Wilderness*. It is a phrase I had jotted down in a small notebook that I always carry in my back pocket. I revisited the phrase over and over and became enamored with the way it sounded to the ear and looked to the eye. The original iteration of the title was meant for a literal document that would give guidance to my daughter about growing up and navigating adolescence. As I was collecting bits and pieces of advice, I thought the idea seemed too rigid and didn't allow for her to be her own person and develop through her own successes and failures. Not wanting to abandon the title that I had grown so fond of, I thought I could use photographs as language and attempt the same guide. Stepping back, I made the decision to take a more poetic and less literal approach with the photographs, which allowed for a much deeper and nuanced interpretation of both the photographs and the title.

3 Distillation of Influences

I have always felt an aversion to originality and considered the term overused and overvalued. I think copying artists or particular artworks that have resonated with you is an acceptable and commendable practice. I am less interested in developing a recognizable style than I am in cultivating a consistent tone. Drawing influences from a multitude of sources -- artistic, musical, literary -- and finding what ties them all together is the challenge.

3.1 Home Remedies

The representation of the family in art seems to sway heavily in the direction of photography. Perhaps this says something about how we collectively see photography operating as documents of experience. Or maybe we view family as an extension of ourselves, and a potential shield to criticism that is attached to photographing strangers. Photographs of children, spouses, and parents can easily become sentimental but can also represent something powerful when they resonate beyond their familial context. Turning your lens to family members is analogous to the medium itself; it is both easy and difficult.

If you think of family photographs, particularly ones that are associated with the South, I imagine it wouldn't take long to get to the work of Sally Mann (Fig. 3.1). Mann represents something essential to photography, a perceptual awareness to notice that which is seen on a routine basis. Images made of a photographer's family members are remarkable because they show an engagement and removal simultaneously. They validate the notion of truth by completely ignoring it. Mann's daughter Jessie describes it best when asked about being in a room with pictures of her bare chest, "that is not my chest. Those are photographs."



Figure 3.1 Sally Mann, White Skates, 1990, 1990, Gelatin Silver Print 7.8 x 9.8"

I bring up Mann in relation to *Purple Bath* (Fig. 3.2) a photo of my daughter Emmaline in the bathtub. When I made the picture, I wasn't responding to or "covering" a Mann photograph. I had actually just gotten a new camera and was eager to try it out. I knew the photo was striking, but it sat idle with no particular place to fit in the series of images I was generating. The working title for the photograph was *Emmaline in the Tub*, but I soon deemed that too personal and sentimental. Once I arrived at the title *Purple Bath*, I knew the image was vague and complicated enough to work its way into the series. The formal aspects that drew me to make the picture initially began to give way to more metaphorical readings and informed the other pictures in the series in a complicated way.

I would be lying if I said there wasn't some trepidation in including the tub image. The reading of Mann's memoir that recounts the backlash she received for photographing her children nude, coupled with the swirling criticism of Sontag and others, made me think twice about how my image might be received. So, I borrowed a tactic from Mann and asked Emmaline how she felt about the photograph being on the wall. She said she liked the picture and thought other people would too. This exchange was a reminder that at the core of creativity, you are (at least I am) attempting to make images that people will like. That attitude puts one in a place of vulnerability much more than making something that is willfully avant-garde. Embracing beauty is a stance I didn't foresee myself taking, but reveling in the pleasure of images is a worthwhile experience. A Robert Frost quote has always stuck with me, "No surprise in the writer, No surprise in the reader." Recently, I've taken it to mean that if I don't want to look at my own images, you can bet no one else will either.



Figure 3.2 Jack Deese, Purple Bath, 2016, Archival Pigment Print, 20x30"

3.2 Geographical Happenstance

To this day, the shadow and influence of William Eggleston on photographers from the “South” still looms large. His photographs, made primarily in Mississippi and Memphis, have visually defined a region both to those residing in and those looking in from the outside. Because of geographical happenstance, photographers working in the South are forced to accept the moniker of a Southern photographer or ignore it completely. Do you accept and champion your work as a voice for southern distinctiveness, or deny that region plays into your consciousness at all? There is little wiggle room for you to reside. This is especially true if photographing in color and during the late afternoon golden light that bathed Eggleston’s photographs. In this manner, Eggleston’s aesthetic has skewed our perceptions to the point that the locations of the photographs cease to matter.

The challenge for me was to make photographs that weren’t so much “about” the south, as much as informed by it. There are certain icons that I thought had to be addressed and done so in a subtle and subversive manner. The first, and most formidable, was kudzu. Like the vine itself, photographs of kudzu are pervasive. It takes over buildings, obliterates road signs, and drapes the backdrop of many a portrait. It permeates the southern landscape. I made hundreds of pictures from all different vantage points at all different times of day. The kudzu always seemed to be a prop, even when it was shown to be the subject. I couldn’t make a picture where the kudzu was at once itself, and a surrogate for something larger simultaneously. I decided to get in close and tighten the framing. This closeness, seeing the texture and saturation, provided the transformation I was seeking. (Fig. 3.3)



Figure 3.3 Jack Deese, *Kudzu (Close-Up)*, 2016, Archival Pigment Print, 44x29"

Another icon of the South I wanted to address was the cross. In looking back over notes from my various critiques, over and over I had written a warning from someone about being too heavy handed with religion. I couldn't tell if I was seeking out all the crosses in the photographs, or they were so prevalent in my path that I couldn't get out of the way. Using my mantra of exploration not illustration, I returned to a photograph of a window in a church taken earlier. The window was textured with yellow colored glass. (Fig. 3.4) The modest brick building was severely cropped in the photograph, but the textured window hinted that it was not a residence. Similarly to the kudzu, finding the right photograph was no easy task.



Figure 3.4 Jack Deese, Yellow Window, 2016, Archival Pigment Print, 20x24”

3.3 Do As You Done

The stories of Flannery O'Connor are of particular influence to this body of work. O'Connor spent most of her life in my hometown of Milledgeville, GA, so her writing was something I was familiar with but purposefully dodged until recently. Upon diving into her stories, I could easily visualize the settings and characters she described and found her writing style akin to double vision, where things become more than they appear at first glance. I began highlighting the descriptions and attempting to set up photographs in response. *Like a Weary Snake Waking Up by a Fire* (Fig 3.3) is one such photograph. The title is derived from a line in her short story; *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*. More impressionable on me than her visual descriptions, is her ability to create a framework strong enough to support multiple entry points. O'Connor's writing seems at times simple and straightforward, but is also intricately laced with metaphor.



Figure 3.5 Jack Deese, Like a Weary Snake Waking Up by a Fire, 2016, Archival Pigment

Print 20 x 30

3.4 Exploring without a Map

My idea of an intriguing photograph has certainly changed over the past three years. I have become more concerned with the lasting power of a photograph than its initial striking visual qualities. I want to make images that you can't shake out of your mind, days or weeks after seeing it. One such image for me is found in Jason Fulford's *Hotel Oracle*. (Fig 3.4) In the photograph, a plastic package holding what appears to be a basketball player figurine is laid on a flat surface and photographed from the side. The corner of the package looks worn, but the is still unopened. The rendering of the plastic package drew me in and stuck in my head for weeks. The strange vantage point of a recognizable object left me uncertain in a pleasurable way. I knew I wanted to make a "cover" of this image, but wasn't sure how to go about it.

Around this same time, I had been photographing gourd birdhouses. Another staple of imagery in the American South, gourd birdhouses dot the rural landscape. Martins east of the Rocky Mountains rely on human-made housing for survival, so these gourd houses are vital. In researching their history, I learned that it is a common belief in the South that martins are wanted around because of the enormous amount of mosquitoes they consume. But, in actuality, martins don't eat many mosquitoes at all. This is analogous to the confabulation of photography and dissemination of images. Once a photograph is seen by enough eyes and from a trusted source, its veracity is accepted and passed along as fact.

Learning about this myth made me less interested in photographing the houses and more interested in the birds themselves. Lacking the lens and patience needed for bird watching, I sought an alternative method, which led me to the hardware store. There, I purchased a Purple Martin decoy to clip onto tree branches as a lure for other martins to join their plastic friend. I took the decoy out of the package and left the open package on the table while I positioned the

decoy in the tree. Failing to get the image I envisioned, I went to place the decoy back in its package and noticed that the shape of the bird could clearly be seen in the plastic. My thoughts immediately went to the Jason Fulford image and I proceeded to photograph the package.

To reference my research and possibly provide a clue for viewers, I arrived at the title *Clear Martin* for the photograph. I think titles are an underutilized tactic to convey information and are treated too much like an afterthought. Coming up with a strong title is no easy task, but when done effectively it opens another entry point. The titles of my photographs elicit the same slow burn as the images, containing multiple layers to reward the fully engaged viewer.



Figure 3.6 Jason Fulford, Untitled Image from *Hotel Oracle*, 2013, The Soon Institute



Figure 3.7 Jack Deese, Clear Martin, 2015, Archival Pigment Print, 20x24”

4 Preserving Fruit

How To Orient Yourself In The Wilderness would have been dramatically different as little as six months ago. The opportunity to have an entire gallery for the installation did great things for my confidence, in what I have made, and in what I will make in the future. I am confident that any photograph I make will find its place, even if I don't know the location right away. To use a sports analogy, I feel like this was my first time playing the entire game. Everything up to this point had been practice, and it's difficult to access progress through practice alone. The show forced me to consider the space as an extension of the work, not just a walled surface for hanging. Much like establishing a tone for a book, the choices made in the gallery were all executed to support the nature of the photographs.

The title *How To Orient Yourself In The Wilderness* has proven to be somewhat psychic in that I have inadvertently created a guide for my art practice after graduate school. I don't think my attitude towards artist statements, or what an artist is obligated to disclose has changed, but my approach has shifted. I now think less in terms of "aboutness" and more in terms of "informed" and "influenced by". Feeling freed from the weight of defining my work has strangely allowed me to do that very thing. Influenced by Kathleen Stewart's book of the same title, I feel confident in saying my work is about "ordinary affects" informed by the sheer pleasure of looking. During one of my gallery talks, I was asked, "What's next for you?" I don't know where I'm going, but I know that I'm prepared for the trip.



Figure 4.1 How to Orient Yourself in the Wilderness Installation View #1, 2016



Figure 4.2 How to Orient Yourself in the Wilderness Installation View #2, 2016



Figure 4.3 How to Orient Yourself in the Wilderness Installation View #3, 2016



Figure 4.4 Jack Deese, *Small Hands*, *Archival Pigment Print*, 2016, 20x24"



Figure 4.5 Jack Deese, *Bologna on Floor*, Archival Pigment Print, 2016, 20x24"



Figure 4.6 Jack Deese, *Watermelon Slice*, Archival Pigment Print, 2016, 20x24"



Figure 4.7 Jack Deese, *Congress St.*, *Archival Pigment Print*, 2016, 20x24”



Figure 4.8 Jack Deese, *Letters*, Archival Pigment Print, 2016, 24x20"



Figure 4.9 Jack Deese, *Gracys Arm*, *Archival Pigment Print*, 2016, 20x24"

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